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By LEVI HILL

Leaco received a \$57.8 million check for its 55th birthday, and much of Lea County will benefit from it.

The company celebrated 55 years and the receipt of a \$57.8 million federal loan Monday in Tatum. The loan is from the USDA Rural Utilities Service and will allow the company to install fiber optics to every home in Tatum and Maljamar and create a redundant system that will help prevent communications outages in Lea County.

"It is a very big milestone," Leaco Chief Executive Officer Laura Angell said after the event Monday. "We will be building new infrastructure that will be replacing the outdated and worn out equipment in Tatum, Maljamar and surrounding areas of Lea County. Our entire network will be positively affected by this project."

USDA Rural Development State Director Terry Brunner and Congressman Harry Teague joined Leaco for the event in Tatum Monday. Brunner presented the company with a ceremonial check for the funds.

"The loan funds will bring new and improved telecommunications services to rural residents in Lea County and, in turn, residents will be with a state-of-the art communications service which will promote business development, increase job opportunities and improve access to educational services," said Brunner in a release.

Teague said he is most pleased the loan will help Lea County's rural schoolchildren.

"Our rural schools lost out when broadband first came out," Teague said. "This is great for the rural schools so those students don't fall behind. This is about creating jobs and opportunities not just in the big cities, but in rural America."

Hundreds of miles of fiber optics cables will be laid out during the course of the project, which is expected to be completed in five years, Angell said.

"We have already started on some of the things. The engineering is done," she said "We will be hiring contractors and local people, providing jobs during construction."

Depending on how much business is increased by the improvements the company will determine if more staff is needed, Angell said. Angell said Tatum is where Leaco first got its start and the company is excited to be upgrading the community's telecommunication lines, many of which are more than 30 years old.

The loan is available to telecommunications companies that serve areas with populations smaller than 20,000. Leaco will also be able to pay back a portion of the loan with federal Universal Service Fund monies — monies paid to the federal government in the form of a small tax on customers' bills.